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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0051

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (LAWRENCE), NEA/FI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KDEM KMPI PREL TS

SUBJECT: MEPI OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED TO 120 JUNIOR CHAMBER INTERNATIONAL CHAPTER PRESIDENTS

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. In February, Embassy Tunis' MEPI Coordinator spoke to the newly-elected presidents of the Junior Chamber International (JCI) chapters in Tunisia about MEPI programs, specifically highlighting the Small Grants Program. There are approximately 2,700 JCI members in Tunisia, aged 18-40. The JCI members call themselves "citizens of the world." Their main focus, according to the JCI charter, is personal development and the betterment of their communities. One chapter has already been awarded a MEPI small grant, and there are many possible MEPI projects in the pipeline. The JCI member base is rich in opportunities for collaboration, as this organization provides an alternative to membership in the ruling political party in Tunisian communities. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) In February, Embassy Tunis' MEPI Coordinator spoke to Tunisia's Junior Chamber International's (JCI) incoming presidents for 2006 about MEPI programs at one of their regularly-scheduled training sessions, held in the northern Tunisian city of Bizerte. The goal was to have the presidents take the goals and opportunities afforded by MEPI funds back to their chapters, and alert members to a possible funding source for any reform-related projects that members might envision in their communities. Although an overview of all MEPI grants was given, we focused on the Small Grants Program, as the most appropriate grant size for individual members' projects. The MEPI Coordinator was impressed with the vision and scope of some of the projects under consideration. There is an opportunity to actively work to develop a stronger partnership between MEPI/Tunis and the JCI membership base in Tunisia.

¶3. (U) JCI is a worldwide federation of young leaders and entrepreneurs, with nearly 200,000 active JCI members between the ages of 18-40 in over 100 countries, and millions of JCI alumni. Its mission encompasses personal development of the member and advancement of the global community. The JCI organization, headquartered in the U.S., was founded in 1944 on the premise that young people working for mutual understanding could prevent another holocaust in the future. In Tunisia, the national chamber, headed by national president Mounir Baatour, has approximately 2,700 members, spread out across the country into 120 individual chapters. Each president is elected for a one-year term in a chapter-wide election. JCI is truly a democratic organization, and members are developing precursor skills necessary for political participation on a wider scale. The group's members also view themselves as "citizens of the world," according to JCI's national credo.

¶4. (SBU) The number of chapters in Tunisia and the membership base have continued to grow since JCI began here in 1983. This growth compares favorably with the stagnation of the ruling party youth groups, that are having trouble

recruiting youth, according to JCI members. When asked if JCI has problems with political authorities, the national president stated that "JCI is apolitical, and we are moderate in our views." The focus of the organization is not on politics, but on the individual and the community. Although JCI has members who are involved with the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party, so far neither RCD or the GOT has interfered in a significant way with the group. And when it comes to MEPI, the group is keen to apply for funding. According to national executive vice-president, Amine Haj Said, "the higher levels of the government are pro-MEPI. It is only when you start dealing with local politicians who rule over local jurisdictions that you have trouble. This is because they are jealous, because we are attracting young people and growing, and they are not." However, he admitted that they have to be careful to work with local officials, who can be obstacles to successful projects in their communities. Mr. Haj Said speaks from first-hand experience, because he was the first JCI member to successfully receive a MEPI small grant.

¶15. (U) In 2005, the JCI chapter in Ksibet El-Mediouni in east-central Tunisia was awarded a MEPI small grant of \$18,240 to provide eight training courses on leadership, business, and entrepreneurial skills intended to spark interest in civic activism among women and youth. Additional components of this project will include supporting participation by new members in local and national events related to the JCI activities; providing training in marketing, accounting, banking, and management techniques for rural businesswomen; and supplying microgrants to women artisans.

¶16. (U) Other projects that individual members are planning to submit in the future are also quite promising. JCI Gremda VP Ennouri told MEPI Coordinator that their chapter is

planning two conferences in October 2006 to address the subject of Islam and democracy "to boost the democratic initiative in our country." The keynote speaker will be a U.S. professor from the Center of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan, who also serves on the board of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy. Another chapter, JCI Zarzis, is attempting to develop an economic zone in that community along the southern coast to attract foreign investment for tourism, commercial and industrial enterprises, and a commercial port. JCI Monastir is planning a Middle East-Africa business conference for June 2006, and will be hosting groups from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

¶17. (U) At the national level, the plans grow larger. The national president hopes to train the 120 chapter presidents in parliamentary procedures based on "Robert's Rules." He also hopes to establish an annual contest to recognize the 10 top students in various study areas, and give them national recognition and further training. There will also be a contest for the nation's best invention by a young person, in a similar format. An online directory to connect members with other members worldwide is planned, and this will provide more opportunities for business exchanges. Another initiative is to establish a Junior Achievement organization in Tunisia, which would take this type of progressive thinking to an even younger group of people.

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: As the vision and programs of these young leaders unfold, the membership base at JCI shows that it is actively thinking about ways to engage the global community, and about how it can better members' lives and communities. It is clear from these initial contacts that the group is serious and hard-working, and a potential source of young leaders for State-sponsored programs. It is also fortunate for Post to have access to a receptive body of young people, because it can be difficult to identify and connect with youth in Tunisia. Post intends to stay engaged with this group to pursue new MEPI projects in the future.

END COMMENT.

BALLARD